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The West German Greens and the Albertan Situation:

On the Receptivity of an Alternative Party.

By

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Protest parties have been an omnipresent feature of the Canadian political landscape since the end of the First World War. These parties have centred around a variety of themes such as agriculture, middle class criticism of monopolies and trusts, nationalism and separatism. Essentially, the raison d'etre of these movements is that of attempting to address a grievance, concern or sentiment, be it real or perceived.

Given that in Canada and Alberta there is a general willingness to entertain the advances of alternative parties, we are provided with subjects that can assist us in exploring the possibility of the acceptance of an "ecology" party. This will be accomplished by focusing on such topics as institutional barriers, characteristics of the electorate, postmaterialism and the concepts of dealignment and realignment. Imperative to this inquiry is the undertaking of a comparative analysis involving West Germany, a nation in which a "green" party has gained widespread acceptance.

Initially, the West German Green party inhabited the periphery of political society. It continually alienated an industry and consumer oriented electorate . In essence, they were preaching to the already converted and the unconvertible. However, political systems are rarely static, and what was once considered a fringe party of marginal concern eventually became an influential and well organized entity. In 1983, for the first time since the inception of a 3 party system in West Germany, a new party garnered a sufficient number of votes to enter the Bundestag.

Obviously, a primary reason for the success of an alternative party in West Germany is that country's institutional situation. West German federalism, which utilizes proportional representation as its electoral mechanism, provides opportunities for political parties to enter the Bundestag if they gain at least five percent of the popular vote. In 1983 the Green Party received 5.6% of the popular vote and, consequently, sent 27 members to the federal parliament. Thus the 5% threshold clause, which helps to ensure that any vigorous minority will be represented, provides considerable benefits to an alternative party.

The Alberta parliamentary system lacks the structural essence which could allow for the proliferation of new political parties. M.L.A.'s are chosen by single-member constituencies, with the first past the post system determining the victor. Thus, one could conceivably have a situation wherein 66% of the electorate is represented by an individual not of their choosing. Evidence of such an occurrence is not rare. For example, Bonnie Laing, Calgary-Bow, received 34.9% of the votes polled, while her opposition combined to garner 65.1%. Similarly John Mcinnis, Edmonton-Jasper Place, received 34.9%, while his opposition gained 65.1%. Obviously, such a system serves as a disadvantage to fledgling political parties. The simple mechanics of the situation hobbles alternative parties unless their support is intensely

geographically concentrated.

As we showed earlier, the West German proportional representation system allows for the entrance of alternative parties. A vote for a non-traditional party is not viewed as a wasted ballot due to the essence of proportional representation. Albertans, conversely, perceive their vote as wasted if it is not cast in favour of a party with a measurable chance of success. Common sense dictates that a voter shall place his X in a position where it will do the most good, or at least the lowest level of damage. As such, an individual may sympathize with an alternative party, but out of necessity he practices the art of strategic voting in order to decrease the probability of his "least-liked" candidate becoming elected. In Alberta, without proportional representation, any gains for a green party would come at the expense of the NDP, without actual green wins, while letting more Conservatives and Liberals gain seats in areas where there are 4-way fights.

West Germany has undergone considerable change over the past 40 years. These decades of growth resulted from this nations push towards modernity after the second world war, and spawned economic, social and political development that ensured affluence for all but the most marginal of society. The advanced industrialism had profound consequences for the German state as there was considerable evidence of weakening traditional groups and institutional networks, in large part due the rise of a welfare state 1. The extent of this welfare state is considerable when one considers that it includes such items as grants for apartments and essentially free higher education. Furthermore, such important sources of information as the Catholic infrastructure and primary family relations became increasingly subordinated to other sources of political information. A new society, characterized by anonymity for the individual and the absence of the protective function of the milieu, was fertile ground for a green party to sow its seed.

Due to the above mentioned reasons, West Germany exhibits a significantly modified political character. In short, these "social changes reduced the importance of traditional social cleavages as the basis for partisan politics"2 In essence, the traditional left right continuum has been somewhat sublimated. It is common theoretical knowledge that when such cleavages become less prominent, voters will concentrate on different factors when weighing one's political choice. The weakening of the traditional issues which previously guided an individual's choice presents an opportunity for a newly emerging party to gain electoral success. We witness this voter volatility is West Germany, as there is a definite trend towards an electorate which no longer sees its itself as identifying with a political party for a significant duration. As alignment dissipates, voters become more inclined to entertain the thought of changing or reforming their political allegiance.

Alberta history, meanwhile, shows us that we possess a relatively stable political system. Our apparent stability is not, oddly enough, a manifestation of our enduring party ties and strong partisan alignment. Rather, our aggregate stability can be explained at the individual level. Fluctuations in voting preference are continually counter-balanced in our nation and our province, as changes in political identity rarely flow in one direction. Thus, our "weak, unstable and inconsistent ties to political parties...creates an electorate in which the potential for wide electoral swings is actually very high, but the actual aggregate fluctuation from one election to another is surprisingly low."3 However, that this potential is seldom realized, or if it is realized the recipient of the voter shift is a party espousing mainstream views focused on economic issues, does not bode well for an ecology based party.

We also see that non-identification with a political party is not a long-term condition in Canada and Alberta. While the Canadian and Alberta electorates do exhibit the tendency for instability, we do not see evidence of long-term dealignment or realignment regarding political parties. Those individuals who deviate from their standard political choice readily and frequently revert back to their initial position. Thus, unlike the West German situation, "the movement of partisanship with vote...is best understood as short-to-long term partisan instability or volatility, rather than a systematic pattern of realignment having predictable long-term consequences"4. Thus the changing cleavage structures, which have the potential to create crucial ideological space for a new party, has not evolved as it has in Germany. In this regard, the prognosis for either cursory or enduring support for a non-traditional fringe party is not encouraging.

The changes witnessed by the citizens of West Germany led to the evolution of a new middle class. An individual representative of this category is, typically, highly educated, between the ages of 18 and 29, white collar and service sector oriented. While this class is not homogenous in all respects, the members of it are bound together by an anti-establishment sentiment and an overwhelming sense of the need for peace. Such persons are less anchored to the traditional values of past generations, and these "post materialists" put a premium on direct democracy, social equality, global unity, ecology and the quality of life as opposed to economic growth.

The West German Green party is nourished by this class as it provides the electorate with alternative to the established parties who are perceived as being unresponsive by a large potion of the citizenry. They also appeal to the peripheral and decommodified groups of voters who exist outside of the formal labour market. Proposed reasons for the proliferation of this new class are manyfold. The growth of the service sector due to societal affluence, availability and enrolment in higher education, the rise

of the information economy and a sense of alienation have all contributed to this evolution. These secular humanists reject formal party affiliation because their views cannot be accommodated within the confines of their traditional platforms and policy stands. This partisan dealignment benefits the Green Party as it allows for successful mobilization of the voter, particularly by appealing to this groups philosophical mind-set and sense of efficacy.

In Alberta, we fail to see the evolution of a large number of post-materialists. It has been suggested that this is simply because the "socio-cultural-political matrix of Canada is fundamentally different from that of most West European countries", 5 thereby inhibiting the growth of a postmaterialist class. Obviously, our lack of extensive government supported programs, such as those found in Germany, plays a role in this phenomenon. Being freed from a variety of financial and economic pressures allowed the West Germany citizen the luxury of entertaining higher ideals. Such individuals surpassed a concern for material security and instead place priority on aesthetic and intellectual needs. In essence, societal affluence bred societal discontent.

The West German post-materialists do not have wavering and uneven levels of adherence to their ideas and philosophies. However, the Canadian or Albertan pseudo-post-materialist does exhibit such wavering allegiance. Polls show that in April 1989, 17% of individuals stated that the environment was their primary concern. In May of 1991, this percentage had dropped to 4% 6. In fact, about 40% of the respondents replied that environmental standards should be compromised in tough economic times in order to save jobs. Furthermore, in a recent study of Calgary's AIR program, which had as its objective drivers leaving their cars at home every 10 days. Polls showed that despite the fact that over 70% supported the campaign, only 30% had actually done it.

The problem with the Albertan environmentalist is not that he is unconcerned with the ecology. The problem exists in the fact that he sees economics and industrial production in a much different manner than West German greens. West German greens question many of the basic tenets of modern society, and its penchant for advocating increased production in order to achieve economic gains and low unemployment. The Greens advocate much more than protecting or repairing the status quo, which is generally the goal of environmentalism. Rather, they stress that we must undergo a rethinking of the way in which we interact with the planet. Emphasis is placed on such concepts as studying "nature's subtle web of interrelated processes", "looking at the world in terms of relationships and integration" and rejecting the prevalent attitude that we can "behave as if an infinite increase in industrial production were possible on the finite planet earth".7 The implications of this method of thought is the advocation of "soft" energy, natural agriculture and an end to the "ravaging" of natural

resources.

Albertans view their world in a much different fashion. Although evidence from such authors such as Nevitte note a presence of postmaterialist orientations among those born after 1945, the extent and pervasiveness of this phenomenon is unknown. Nevitte states that postmaterialists will appear as soon as we witness the decline "an agenda dominated by issues related to the stratification of an industrial society and the emergence of an agenda favouring such lifestyle concerns as environmentalism, minority issues and the politics of high ideals"8. This has not happened. In fact, as a variety of polls show, Albertans are not changing their behaviour, and are reluctant to embrace ecological precepts.9 Despite what is stated by the individual on the street regarding concern for the environment, the fact of the matter is that consumption in Alberta has actually increased, as has net energy usage. The only encouraging statistic is that Albertans spend more on environment-friendly products than any other province (that this can be attributed primarily to the relative affluence of Albertans is noteworthy).

The question which must be answered, therefore, is why Albertans are prone to vacillation and backtracking when it comes to ecological concern. This is a function of Inglehart's statement that "an individual's priorities reflect the socio-economic environment; one places the greatest subjective value on those things that are in short supply" 10 As such, it is not possible for a Green candidate in Alberta to campaign on a platform based on soft energy and reformed agriculture. The fact of the matter is Alberta is still dependent on what it extracts from the earth. Alberta produces 80% of Canada's conventional oil and 86% of its natural gas. Due to Alberta's natural wealth we are among the top 10 oil producers in the world, hold 2.5% of the world's natural gas and 45% of the world's sulphur trade. Alberta's energy sector accounts for about 16% of the province's gross domestic product and provides over 80,000 direct jobs. A quick glance at agriculture is also beneficial. Agriculture provides 30 out of every 100 jobs in Alberta, and total farm receipts are expected to reach 4.5 billion dollars in 1992. In light of these facts, it would seem that postmaterialist attitudes, which depend to a great degree on the socio-economic environment, would have difficulty evolving in such a climate. Without a fundamental reorientation of values, environmental consciousness will be tied to economic cycles. This is precisely what we have seen in Alberta, as evidenced by numerous polls.

We also witness a measurable difference between the characteristics of the West German and Albertan electorates. In West Germany, over 16% of the general population holds at least a general diploma. In Alberta, this figure is under 11%. This has an implication for an environmental party because there is considerable evidence that those who vote green are "lodged disproportionately in the well-

educated and more issue driven segments of the population; postmaterialism engages a more articulate and demanding public" 11 In fact, amongst the West Germans who voted for the Green Party, 51% held at least a secondary school diploma. Thus, in terms of educational attainment, the West German electorate would appear to be more amenable to the views of an ecology based party.

Alberta's electoral system is one in which rural areas are somewhat overrepresented. This phenomenon can be effectively illustrated if one takes the three least populated rural ridings, and compare them with the three least populated urban ridings located in Calgary. The rural total equates to 44,090, while we arrive at a figure of 79,895 when we total the urban numbers. It is also interesting to note that if we combine the three most populated Calgary ridings, the sum reaches 137,665. The importance of these figures for an Albertan green party rests in the fact that schooling level in rural regions is lower than that of urban areas. For example, the number of individuals with less than grade 9 in the rural riding of Smoky River is 19.3%, compared to the provincial average of 10.8%. Furthermore, the percentage of Smoky River residents who have obtained a university degree is 4.5%, compared with to the provincial average of 10.8%. This has obvious implications for an ecology based party, particularly when one considers that educational attainment is a strong indicator of voting preference. When one combines the fact that educational attainment in rural areas is less than half the provincial average with the fact that rural areas are overrepresented in the Alberta electoral system, you have a situation wherein a green party would have difficulty succeeding.

In West Germany we also witness that fringe or minority parties have a reasonable opportunity to have their election expenses reimbursed. The Party Law of 1967 states that any party garnering 5% of the electoral vote be awarded 3.5DM for each ballot cast in their favour. The Greens were thus awarded institutional support in proportion to their number of seats in the Bundestag. With 27 positions the party thereby was accorded 7.2 million DM, which is paid per annum. Such governmental support is not available in Canada.

Canada's correlate to West Germany's Party Law is the Election Expenses Act of 1974. While this legislation is federally sponsored, it does have considerable implications for a political party at the provincial level. The success or feasibility of a provincial party is greatly enhanced if it can depend on the support of a federal cohort. The development of a national base can more easily allow a fledgling provincial to enter the electoral drama. Without this support, such a party would have to rely solely on the local level for both financial and philosophical allegiance. However, EEA awards local candidates who have gained 15% of the popular vote in their constituency considerable campaign reimbursement. For obvious reasons, this decidedly benefits

established parties. For a fringe party whose limited finances are being stretched to the limit, such a provision can do considerable harm.

The effect of this financial disincentive cannot be exaggerated, particularly when one takes into account the nature of electoral competition. An Albertan green party with limited finances would have difficulty competing with the methods used by the established political parties. With the advent of "new politics" the emphasis is placed on "contemporary campaign technologies and strategies, guided by professional consultants using highly sophisticated sample surveys and polling techniques."12 In such a system a premium is placed on wealth, and for obvious reasons this advantages the established parties who are already economically established.

As we have witnessed, numerous factors inherent to West Germany allowed for the evolution and acceptance of an ecology based party. The characteristics of the electorate, its social history, a system of proportional representation and other institutional factors all contributed to the success of a Green Party. However, it must also be noted that achievements of this party would not have been possible if it were not for the "cooperation" of the competition. In essence, the West German Green Party "elected members largely by taking votes from social democratic parties slow to mend their anti-environmentalist ways".13

In Alberta we witness that even the marginal number of citizens holding views similar to West German Green's are absorbed by the New Democratic Party. The logic behind universality, long a fundamental precept of the N.D.P., is exactly the same as that which propels environmental protection. Just as the old CCF argued for an old age pension without a means test and universal family allowances, so also must the NDP argue for environmental protection or all.

There is considerable evidence that the NDP has recognized the potential of a green platform. The Alberta New Democrat Party's 1990 Environmental Principles Statement is a concept designed to capture the ecology vote. The Statement urges the Provincial Government, as a public trustee, to "preserve, protect and where necessary restore the quality of the environment of Alberta". Furthermore, it states that "The Government of Alberta has a responsibility to preserve Alberta's land, water and air with the global ecosphere". Alberta's NDP has also called for an environmental bill of rights, an environmental auditor general and a "whistle-blowers" act which would protect employees who have reported an environmentally negligent employer. Such an emphasis on ecological concerns effectively siphons off votes from the Green Party. The recent Edmonton-Strathcona by-election bares this out, as the Greens candidate Betty Paschen received 4.54% of the percentage of ballots, despite the fact she was running in a

constituency hospitable to her platform. The fact of the matter is, the NDP is seen as a more viable vehicle for the expression of "green" interests, particularly in the absence of proportional representation.

West German Greens believe that equality of people is imperative if society is to be progressive and non-exploitative. This precept is followed unerringly, and is even applied to political leadership. The Greens follow a practice termed "rotation", wherein the primary spokesperson and leader of the party is dismissed after a period of one year. The primary reason for this limited mandate is because of the fear that "an individual representative could gain too much status resulting in expressions of distrust and jealousy".**14**

Alberta Greens follow a similar practice of rotation. Most decisions are made by a council of seven, of which three members will speak for the party on a rotating basis. There is no identifiable leader of the party, only a "figurehead" who accepts responsibility for event coordination and other such sundry items. Rather than rely on a charismatic leader as a focal point, the Alberta Greens attempt to sell their underlying philosophy to the electorate. That the absence of an identifiable leader is partially responsible for their failure is a truism, as the Albertan voter is somewhat less responsive to ideological concerns. Rather, "our voting behaviour is typified by flexible partisans responding to short-term forces associated with party leader images...."**15** In fact, fully 52% of respondents stated that the personal qualities of leaders was the underlying basis for their choice. In light of this fact, if an ecology party were to gain electoral acceptance in Alberta, a radical change in their concept of leadership would have to be undertaken.

It seems safe to assume that the Albertan situation is one which is illconducive, if not hostile, to an ecology based party. The barriers to acceptance are numerous, and they include such particulars as our electoral system, stable dealignment, the greening of the NDP, a reliance on primary resources and the general political culture of our province. However, more significant than all the above mentioned hurdles is the absence of postmaterialist values in the Alberta electorate. Postmaterialism was the driving force behind the success of the West German Green Party, and without this ingredient the greens of Alberta will remain on the periphery of the political realm.

NOTES

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4 R. Inglehart, "The Changing Structure of Political Cleavages in Western Society", in Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 23-75.

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7 Fritjof Capra, Green Politics. (New York, E.P. Dutton), 30.

8 Capra, 30.

9 "They Scream, We All scream for More Green" in Alberta Business v.8 (7), September, 1991, 5.

10 Neil Nevitte et al., 479.

11 Gerd Langguth, The Green Factor in German Politics, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), 27-31.

12 Khayyam Zev Paltiel, "Political Marketing, Party Finance and the Decline of Canadian Parties", Canadian Parties in Transition, (Scarborough: Nelson 1989), 335.

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14 Langguth, 72,

15 H.D. Clarke et al. "Impact of Leaders and Issues in the 1979 Election", Canadian Journal of Political Science, Sept 1982, 521.